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ORDINATION

OF

MR. ELLIS MENDELL,

NORWOOD, JUNE 4, 1879.

7551.447

SERMON

BY

REV. A. H. PLUMB,

PASTOR OF WALNUT AVENUE CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH,

BOSTON HIGHLANDS.

BOSTON:
PRESS OF T. O. METCALF & CO., 101 MILK STREET.
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June 20, 1917

SERMON.

"How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him that bringeth good tidings, that publisheth peace; that bringeth good tidings of good, that publisheth salvation; that saith unto Zion, my God reigneth!"—ISAIAH 52: 7.

Even thus, ever more, ought to sound out the voice of welcome, of glad and thankful rejoicing, from the sons of men everywhere, as to them comes, by whatever messenger, the message from God to men in his holy word.

The Bible! The religion of the Bible! All hail! Bright harbinger of good. Welcome, thrice welcome, with ten thousand thanks from every heart, thy glad tidings publishing peace, thy good tidings of good publishing salvation, saying to each one who will accept it: "The throne of the universe is on thy side; thy peace and prosperity are forever assured, for the supreme reigning power is in league with thee. Thy God reigneth!"

Not so do the guilty and corrupt children of men receive the message of eternal life.

The Son of God who brought it, though heralded by angels singing peace and good will to

men, had little welcome here. "He came unto his own and his own received him not." Evermore his messengers have had to say, "Who hath believed our report?" "Unto the Jews a stumbling block, and unto the Greeks foolishness," the gospel of reconciliation has always appeared. That is, not formal enough to men of formal ways; to men of ease and culture, too severe and stern. No more can men be suited by the gospel than the captious children in the market place, to whom their fellows called, saying: "We have piped unto you and ye have not danced, we have mourned unto you and ye have not lamented." Not only do all with one consent begin to make excuse, when bidden to the gospel feast, but they all contrive the same excuse: all their excuses are in fact the same. The proffered banquet is not to their taste. It is no feast for them. When addressed by the Lord of the harvest, each replies: "Lord I know thee that thou art an hard man, reaping where thou hast not sown, and gathering where thou hast not strawed." "Hard, hard, hard," men are perpetually saying, is the doctrine of the Bible and of the religion of Christ. "We cannot accept it. It is too hard, too dark, too stern, and gloomy, and severe."

Well, then let us go where the Bible is not, and never has been seen: where no sound or rumor of its hard stern teaching, of any of its teaching, has ever come. Let us get on Stanley's track, and since King Mtesa cannot now furnish us a mind

unclouded by the dark shadows that the Bible casts, since Stanley and other travellers have told him some things which the Bible contains, let us pass his vast and populous dominions, plunge further on into the heart of Africa, and when at the most central point, strike north or south from the track of the great explorer, and enter the vast unknown lands. There, remote from the outer world, shut off hitherto from all intercourse with the inhabitants of Christian lands, let us say we find an immense and arable region, teeming with a vigorous though untutored population, engaged in agriculture and the ruder arts, and ruled by a wise and benignant king. Let us suppose we find flourishing and cherished there all the virtues that have ever been found in any pagan land, in ancient or modern times. But of every man there, as we come to know him well and learn his inner life, it is absolutely certain we shall find six hard and sorrowful things to be true, and those are the very things which men call the hard things of the Bible. The purer and wiser, the more candid and reflective your untaught African, the more readily will you see in him these six hard and mournful things; these things for which the Bible is blamed, as if the Bible caused them, as if it were only by the knowledge of the Bible that the idea of these things came among men.

Take then this candid, able and high-minded African, uncontaminated by the gloomy teachings

of the Bible, unprejudiced by the sight or knowledge of a single believer in the Bible, and what do you find in him?

The first three of these six hard mournful things you will find in him are these: First, he does wrong things; second, wrong-doing brings him unhappiness of mind; yet third, it is very difficult for him to cease from doing wrong.

Of course, his standard of right and wrong is very different from ours, but he has a standard. Some things, doubtless many, are to him clearly wrong. If you rob him he will not be in doubt as to the character of the act. His nature is not capable, perhaps, of as much suffering as ours from a lack of peace of mind, but he has some capacity to feel and does feel inward reproaching and unrest in view of his wrong-doing. He can discriminate perfectly between that feeling and the experience which comes to him when he has done a noble deed, self-sacrificing and generous; when he has proved himself upright and true.

Yet though he has a perfectly clear knowledge that wrong-doing always produces unhappiness, that he never can attain peace with himself unless all wrong-doing is put away forever, he is forced to admit that it is a very difficult, almost impossible thing for him to leave off forever all things that are wrong.

The second three of the six hard things you will find in this man, when you take him in his best

moods,—for not always is any one vividly conscious of the plainest axioms of moral and religious truth,—are these: First, he is conscious of ill desert on account of his wrong-doing. A man instinctively dodges, hides, skulks, when he has done wrong, and the soul of man just as instinctively looks out for coming retribution, expects to be brought to account. Second, he dreads retribution. He fears punishment. He wishes he could escape it. He knows with that unsettled account standing against him he never can prosper. He is uneasy always, when he attains any clear consciousness, as he sometimes does, of the fact that in his wrong doing he has set himself in opposition to the great supreme will. He knows he is justly deserving of ill. He wishes he could rid himself of the anticipation of evil on account of his wrong. But, thirdly, he sees it is a hard thing to escape just penalty. The more candid and reflective he becomes, the more clearly he sees the difficulty of his ever escaping from that ill which he deserves, on account of his wrong acts and which he is afraid to meet. He asks how can that which is right and just, and which I feel is coming ever be escaped? How can it be turned aside? Why must it not, soon or late, come down on me where it rightly belongs. He hopes there may be some way to avert it, but he can see none. He makes many offerings, undergoes sometimes severe self-inflictions, performs exhausting services, impelled by his deep

ineradicable expectation of coming ill on account of his wrong-doing, alarmed by his fears of the dreadfulness of that ill, and troubled by the great difficulty of averting it.

Now these six experiences of this representative man, in some of his fellows would be hard to find at first, just as in some of them, degraded in mind and heart, coarse, brutal and benumbed in their moral perceptions and sensibilities, it would be hard to discover some of the plainest and most palpable of the universal instincts of mankind. The love of offspring, for instance, in some of them might seem at first altogether obliterated, but if it is sought at the right time and in the right way, it would doubtless appear; or if not, the exceptions would be so rare as to prove the rule, that the trait really belongs to human nature as such.

So with these six facts of moral experience. To state them in pairs: First and second, the consciousness of being a wrong-doer and a consciousness of ill desert on account of wrong-doing, *i. e.:* a sense of sin and a sense of meriting punishment for sin. Third and fourth, a feeling that the wrong-doer must always suffer condemnation within and must always dread retribution from without; is unhappy in his own soul and under the ban of disapproval from others, even from the Supreme Governing Power. Fifth and sixth, it is a most difficult thing on the one hand to rid one's self of all wrong-doing and from its consequent inward

unhappiness, and on the other to escape the penalty our sins justly deserve. These are experiences of man as man. The old heathen sages show them. The higher the moral culture and the purer the character, the more clearly these facts appear.

And if the facts in human nature in its best specimens justify these views of human conduct and destiny, much more must the facts in human nature generally, in its lower and more depraved manifestations, give occasion for entertaining these views as just. Though the lower specimens of humanity may not always appreciate these facts as keenly as the higher, or discern them so quickly, of course, there is the more ground for believing in the existence of such facts the worse a man becomes.

Now when these facts are carefully considered, they are found to place man in a very dark condition. Of themselves they give him nothing of comfort or of hope. They are hard facts to deal with; they are stubborn facts; they cannot be removed by sophistry; they cannot be carried by assault; they are impregnable and enduring. They can be forgotten for the time being. In certain moods they may be lost sight of; under the spell of certain delusions they may be, now and then, here and there, denied, but in the end, and in the great hours of life,—the critical hours of urgent stress, of honest feeling, of clear vision,—they are vividly seen, and moreover, they are then felt to be the transcendent facts of man's condition and prospects.

And as we look intently and patiently at these facts they are seen to be, as has been intimated, the very facts which men most dislike to own, and which they sometimes try to avoid, by saying it is only the Bible that teaches them and the Bible is not true. But we have seen it is not to the Bible that we owe our knowledge of these facts. They belong to human nature everywhere and always, before the Bible was given, where the Bible has never gone. And these facts, which cannot be denied, put us all in a most woeful plight.

We are conscious of sin, that sin necessarily produces inward unhappiness, and that it is so hard to put away sin and to escape from its consequent unhappiness, that we cannot see how we ever can do it. There, then is at least the well grounded fear of eternal wretchedness.

Then, too, I am conscious of deserving punishment, I am conscious of fearing and expecting punishment, and I do not see how I am ever to escape from that displeasure which God must eternally feel towards me as a sinner. Certainly if I evermore persist in sin, as I can see no reason to think I shall not, God must forever disapprove of me, as I must forever disapprove of myself, and my own eternal disapproval of myself is eternal wretchedness, and God's eternal disapproval of me is eternal punishment.

Against these conclusions the human mind continually struggles, but in vain. Against them it

continually hopes, but with dark forebodings intermingled all the while: the hope is more a desire than an expectation.

And the candid mind is compelled to admit even in its brightest hours, that it does not know, that it cannot know, that it will not be forever unhappy and forever condemned. It frames many arguments against the probability of such a result, but such arguments never meet the case, they never give certainty. They are only probabilities, inferences, analogies, expressive of the earnest hope of future well being. They have no positive evidence of the fact. They cannot have. While on the other hand, the hard, stubborn, dreadful facts of my condition declare, I am now a sinner. I am, therefore, necessarily wretched, and all my efforts hitherto to cease absolutely from all sin have failed. Sin binds harder, the longer it is continued in, the more the habit of sin is confirmed; and all the tendencies of my nature lead me to fear that I never shall cease to sin, and therefore shall never cease to be wretched. Moreover I am a creature under law. I am a subject of a government. The displeasure of that government I have justly incurred. It cannot but manifest displeasure towards me a sinner, nor can I see how I, can ever in any way, avert that displeasure. I deserve it, I fear it, nor can I see any possible way ever to escape it, by any thing I can do.

All the evidence then that I have, of my relations to the violated law of the government under which I live, and must live forever, shows that I am in danger of its eternal displeasure. I do not know that I can ever escape it. I cannot know that I ever will. No evidence within my reach can be authoritative. I may reason from my desire that I shall get free. I may argue from my hope that I shall escape. I may make so sad a doom seem improbable from some points of view. I may think, and hope, and guess, and even affirm that it cannot be; but when pressed by my fears for some solid ground of belief, some firm impregnable bulwark of hope, I cannot find it. It is not to be had. The future looks dark. These awful facts still stare me in the face. Forever sinning, forever wretched, forever condemned; eternal sin, eternal misery, eternal punishment.

These are doctrines of natural religion. We do not need revealed religion to learn them. These are affirmations of reason. At least these are the reasonable forbodings of one in my condition, against which reason gives me no sure provision.

It is reason herself that hangs these dark portentous clouds athwart my pathway, and she refuses to dispel them. She leaves me under their chilling shadow, their awful gloom.

The superficial, the careless, may often think the consciousness of sin, and of ill desert are slight things; that inward reproaching and fear of retribu-

tion are unimportant and transient experiences; that the difficulty of ceasing from all sin and of escaping from its attendant wretchedness, and the difficulty of avoiding the just penalty of my sin are small difficulties, unworthy of much thought; but the best minds, most spiritual, most candid and thoughtful, all minds in certain best hours of clear vision and honest feeling, confess that if these experiences are not momentous, then nothing is; if these things are not enough to make me serious, then nothing is.

"I have never done anything very bad." "I do not feel specially regretful as I look over my life." "If there is anything that I have ever been led into that is not just right, I expect that I shall more and more lay it aside." "I do not feel that I am deserving of much blame." "I do not think God will be hard with me." "I imagine all these things will turn out right in the end."

These are statements we hear often enough, and we know well enough from what kind of persons, from what states of mind these words come.

Socrates never said such things. Plato never did. None of the great sages of pagan times ever did. No earnest, candid, honest soul in any age, eager after spiritual truth, accustomed to ponder deeply over the mournful facts in human experience, ever talked in this way,—this loose, easy, careless, unreflective way. Under the awful revelations of God's majesty and power, men are not used to indulge such thoughts. *We can give no credence*

to such judgments of the soul's condition and prospects.

Men who say such things say just what the most obtuse and hardened criminals often say, just what the pure, holy, meek and exalted characters of earth never say. They say not what they know to be true, but what they wish to be true. And in expressing the wish that such things may prove to be true, they betray the fear they still have, that after all such things will not prove to be true.

Furthermore, one reason why these affirmations of reason, these conclusions of natural religion are often charged upon the Bible, as if without the Bible we should not know them, and as if by denying the truth of the Bible, or of certain parts of it, or by any easy interpretation of it, we might get rid of them; is that the Bible reminds us of these facts, will not permit us to forget them, as we are inclined to do, and as for a season we sometimes succeed in doing. The Bible re-affirms these great utterances of natural religion. It everywhere takes them for granted, and proceeds on the assumption that they are true. It constantly reiterates them, it emphasizes them, it makes corroborative statements respecting them. Other related and confirmatory facts it declares. And thus men, continually reminded by the Bible of these unwelcome facts, which they would gladly forget, come to say that it is only by the Bible that we know them at all, and that if we can get rid of the Bible, or break its

authority, we shall get rid of these hard statements. Not so. These statements stand as long as sinful human nature stands. The Bible comes to man as to a sinner, lost and helpless, wretched and condemned. It finds him in that condition. That condition furnishes the reason why the Bible comes. The Bible not only takes for granted and re-affirms these mournful facts about man's condition and prospects; that he is an ill deserving sinner, conscious of sin and of ill desert, unhappy in his own soul, and fearful of retribution from God; that he is involved in such habits of sin, and is under such just condemnation for sin, as to make it most difficult to recover him from his sin and its consequent wretchedness, and to save him from the just penalty of his sin; but the Bible also makes further statements respecting him, sustaining and explaining, to some extent, these facts. It tells us how men came to be sinners: that God made man holy, but that he fell by his own transgression; that all mankind are so perverted by indulgence in sin, and sin is such a blighting, blinding power, that men in spite of their unhappiness in sin, yet love it too well readily to give it up; and that even those most inclined to abandon sin, find it is a most fearful struggle to break the bonds of sinful habit in which their souls are held.

But all this is only re-affirming, corroborating, or explaining that which men knew before; which in spite of all efforts to forget it, or deny it, and in

spite of occasional brief seasons of forgetfulness of it, they still never can quite obliterate from their consciousness, but must carry with them forever more. And this knowledge, whenever it does rise into the field of consciousness must always prove a source of continual wretchedness, and of gloomy forebodings of ill.

The Bible finds man fearful that unless he abandon sin and be relieved of its penalty he must be forever wretched and forever condemned, and the Bible confirms that fear. It shows additional reason why that fear is well-grounded, and affirms most positively, that the soul forever persisting in sin must forever suffer self-reproach, and the reproach of all right beings, of the Supreme Being. Yet even in this it does not originate that fear. All it says is only emphasizing and enforcing that which the unaided reason declares. Its voice is in harmony with the voice of man's nature. If it seem severe, it is only the severity of truth, and it is a severity we do not escape from by refusing to listen to its voice. The hard facts of nature still remain. "Faithful are the wounds of a friend." The Bible were no friend, if it prophesied smooth things, when smooth things are false; if it cried, "Peace, peace, when there is no peace."

No, the Bible is not to be charged with originating the hard things it utters. Rid yourself of the Bible, you will not rid yourself of the hard things it contains. They remain. They were here before

the Bible came. They are the underlying facts of man's condition without the Bible.

And so we come back to our text, a description of the feelings with which man should welcome the Bible.

"How beautiful," that is, how welcome the appearance, how cheerful the sight. "How beautiful upon the mountains," on the cold dark mountains of our desolation. "How beautiful upon the mountains the feet of him that bringeth good tidings." No hard, stern, gloomy announcement the Bible brings, but good tidings. "That publisheth peace." Aye! Peace at last for my torn and agitated heart. Peace is possible when I seemed doomed to eternal conflict with myself and with God, to the unending unrest of self-reproach, the unceasing distress of the Divine condemnation. There can be peace, peace within and peace without. At peace with myself, and at peace with my offended Judge. "That publisheth peace, that bringeth good tidings of good." Aye! Blessed reiteration of comforting words! The word tidings itself is a word of good news, and tidings not only are brought, but good tidings; and to repeat and emphasize the glad announcement, it is "good tidings of good." "That publisheth salvation." Oh, the wondrous word! Salvation from sin and wrath, from guilt and fear: peace within, safety and eternal blessing without. Here is fulness of mercy! Here are riches of grace! Publishing peace, publishing salvation. "How beautiful the

feet of him that saith unto Zion, thy God reigneth." That saith to all who are willing henceforth to be called the chosen of God, to all who want to be his Zion, his people, his obedient and loving servants, that He who reigns Supreme and orders all things is their God; that His Almighty Power is on their side; that no hostile force shall ever prevail to harm them, since high on the eternal throne their God, their Defender, their Father and Friend forever reigns.

Oh, will men never see that the gospel is a remedy? that the Bible comes to offer relief? that it brings good tidings of good? that it publisheth peace? publisheth salvation?

Finding man conscious of sin and of ill desert, conscious of the difficulty of ever ridding himself of sin and its attendant wretchedness, and conscious of the difficulty of ever escaping from the feared and deserved penalty of sin, the Bible does not contradict the facts. It admits them all. It emphasizes them all. It declares that these facts furnish the reason why it came. It says to each man, yes, you are a sinner, ill deserving, wretched in yourself, condemned of God. It is a hard, almost impossible thing to rid yourself of sin and its inevitable wretchedness, to escape from the dreaded and righteous penalty of sin. But here is the wondrous and cheering word, which nowhere else is found, it is not quite impossible. There is one way, marvellous, amazing, but true. The Lord hath "laid

help upon one that is mighty." God's infinite and eternal Son has come to earth as man. "He hath borne our griefs and carried our sorrows." He was "made a curse for us." "The Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all." "With his stripes we are healed." "Him hath God exalted to be a Prince and a Savior, in whom we have redemption through his blood, even the forgiveness of sins." And through him has come the Holy Spirit to aid us in freeing ourselves from sin. He imparts his wondrous power and recreates the fallen man. He gives to us new spiritual life. He regenerates the soul. He sanctifies the heart. By the Holy Spirit's aid, for Christ's sake, the work of our recovery from sin is begun, continued, and triumphantly accomplished. Through the intercession of Christ as an atoning Savior, the penalty of the violated law can be safely remitted to the penitent sinner, and the most unpropitious hard and dreadful facts of man's condition are met with full provision against their dark forebodings and fearful power. Against the prospect of continued sin and wretchedness and penalty; against eternal sin, eternal misery, eternal punishment, the Bible offers complete provision. It gives the most cheering and positive assurances that man can be rescued from sin, can be freed from penalty. That which we could learn in no other way, that which we were greatly concerned to learn, and which man tried in vain to learn, the Bible tells us. Against our most alarming fears,

against the most obstinate declarations of reason concerning our fearful exposure, the Bible guarantees a full provision.

It is not strange that a man can be eternally lost. The wonder is that any individual soul of all this lost and guilty race can ever be saved. That is the hard thing to do,—to save a soul. That is the difficult thing to imagine,—how a single soul can be saved. That is what no man, by any possibility, could ever know, without a revelation from God. Christ "hath brought life and immortality to light through the gospel." Men might hope that in some way they might be saved, though they could see no possible way, could imagine none, could not positively believe there was one. Dimly groping for light, blindly hoping for relief, great and honest souls, candid, repentant, went on, one after another, Socrates and such as he, on into the great unknown. All repentant souls God saved indeed for Christ's sake, but they did not know they were to be saved. They could not know it. They died in the dark, with but the dim light of a vague hope, and overshadowed still by a dark portentous cloud.

Oh, if to Socrates, to any such honest soul, looking and longing in its helplessness for some one to aid it, and confessing its impotence and sorrow and sin, there had come the knowledge of this better hope, this "anchor of the soul both sure and steadfast," what a welcome would the revelation have received! With what eager gladness would

such souls have rejoiced to hear the gospel's joyful sound!

Friends, to you this glad announcement has been made. Today a new ambassador comes, at the call of this church, to stand here in the name of Christ, to repeat over and over this wondrous word of grace. Oh, bid this gospel welcome. Hail it as a gospel, an evangel truly, a message of pardon, a proclamation of good tidings, publishing peace, publishing salvation.

The gospel is not hard. Say not of the Bible, hard, hard, hard. Rather say, glad, glad, glad is its message; joy, joy, joy, its grateful story; peace, pardon, light and life forever more are the blessings it brings.

How happy are our ears
That hear this joyful sound,
Which kings and prophets waited for
And sought, but never found!

How blessed are our eyes
That see this heavenly light!
Prophets and kings desired it long,
But died without the sight.

Beloved members of this ancient church. In the name of Him whose "right hand planted this vineyard, and made strong for himself this branch,' we, "the messengers of the churches," salute you. And this is the word of our salutation: "We then, as workers together with Him, beseech you also that ye receive not the grace of God in vain."